Greatness: The Aspiration and Goal of Psychology

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Abstract
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Keywords
greatness, personal greatness, goal of psychology, achievement, success, happiness, well-being, flourishing, optimal

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Greatness: The Aspiration and Goal of Psychology

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Overview

“If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.” With a great smile the Cheshire Cat offers this wisdom to Alice in the Lewis Carroll fairy tale, Alice In Wonderland. Where does the field of psychology hope to go? One goal of psychology is the comprehensive study of mental processes and behavior. That goal is clear. However, the second goal of applying psychology lacks the same clarity. Various goals have been offered as the end-point of applied psychology. These are as divergent as individuals achieving normalcy to individuals attaining optimal functioning. Though clear individually, these goals fail to provide an end-point clear and elevated enough to cover the entire range of psychological study and application. We need to answer the questions: What is our goal in assisting individuals and groups psychologically? What do we hope to help them attain?

Mainstream clinical psychology focuses primarily on the illness of individuals and only tangentially explores the possibility of helping people fully actualize their human potential
beyond that of achieving normalcy. Though it is clear that the study of pathology is important to the mental health of individuals, the focus on illness and the reliance on a medical/disease model have limited the study and application of psychology. Peterson (2006) says that the disease model proposes a view of people as “flawed and fragile, casualties of cruel environments or bad genetics, and if not in denial then at best in recovery. This worldview has crept into the common culture of the United States. We have become a nation of self-identified victims, and our heroes and heroines are called survivors and sometimes nothing more (p. 5).” Individuals who are mentally healthy fall outside the realm of traditional psychology because their focus is on using the fullness of their capabilities since they have already secured mental health. So traditional psychology, though heroic in its study and treatment of pathology and mental illness, fails to provide a goal for individuals who are mentally healthy and seeking to optimize their capabilities.

Positive psychology proposed to refocus psychology on assisting individuals who desire to live to the fullness of their capabilities. Positive psychology is “the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p.630). Rather than a disease model of psychology, positive psychology focuses on enhancing the healthy qualities of an individual and community and fostering these qualities to diminish pathology and increase well-being. It is the study and application of what is good in life with a desire to develop and expand those experiences. In contrast with the disease model and focus of traditional psychology, positive psychology focuses on “making normal people stronger and more productive and making high human potential actual (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8).
Is positive psychology the answer to my question about a goal? Not really. In its short history positive psychology has offered multiple end goals and has not settled on one in particular. Some of the goals are as universal as happiness, which can be defined as the current evaluation of the pleasurable and/or meaningful aspects of life. Other goals like subjective well-being, a person’s affective and cognitive evaluations of their life, are relatively recent and a compilation of concepts (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). Yet, none of these goals presents an optimal end-point, an ideal that individuals can strive for.

A new unifying goal is necessary for psychology that encourages the pursuit of the highest possible achievement while not creating an unreachable standard. Practitioners of psychology, whether clinicians, researchers, or teachers, will be greatly assisted if they have a specific focus for their study and application. A science about humanity has to include both the current reality and the underlying possibility (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). What do we hope our study and application will lead to? If we are not just prisoners of our genetics and circumstance then, as Bandura (2006) states “humans can transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and shape their life circumstances and the courses their lives take” (p. 164). What is the apex of human functioning to which everyone can aspire? I propose greatness as the unifying goal of psychology. Yet greatness cannot be seen just as an end-goal. It is both the end and the journey; the peak of the mountain and the mountain itself.

What is greatness? Allow me to propose a simple definition that encompasses the aspects of both journey and destination. I propose the definition of greatness for psychology to be the optimal use of the positive psychological resources and capabilities of an individual. This multi-faceted definition of greatness needs to be clarified to explore the rational behind the wording and the richness of meaning.
In this paper, after clarifying the definition of greatness, I will offer a brief review of psychology to identify some of the historical foci and the limitations of previous assumed or stated end-goals. Then I will explore the historical precedent for greatness as the goal of psychology, and examine how recent psychological research leads to the necessity of aspiring to greatness. Finally I will explore the implications of greatness as a comprehensive goal for psychology on a micro, meso, and macro level.

**Definition of Greatness**

What am I proposing by calling for greatness to be the goal of psychology? What does greatness in this context mean? Though there is a plethora of use of the word *great* in our society, *greatness* still remains a pinnacle, something that describes a higher elevation than the norm. Yet greatness can be understood in various ways depending on where the term is being used. It is important to isolate the definition of greatness within psychology to understand if a construct and operational definitions are plausible. Freud highlighted the importance of clarifying the meanings of greatness when he stated in a letter to Ludwig Binswanger on April 14, 1912 “I also believe one ought to differentiate between greatness of achievement and greatness of personality.” Though it is suspected he was writing about himself when he mentioned greatness, Freud nevertheless acknowledged the importance of the variety of meaning in different contexts. Koestenbaum (1991) writes that “Philosophic greatness is the commitment to relinquish mediocrity forever” (p. 53). He expands the concept by adding that “Greatness is the struggle against nihilism (what philosophers call the descent into ‘nothingness’)” (p. 54). This is necessarily differentiated from society’s historical greatness which some researchers believe are manifest in specific individuals, such as Abraham Lincoln (Albright, 1987). Other researchers believe that historical or societal greatness involves influential personalities plus
decisive events; mass movements, trends, demographic shifts and many other factors that have little to do with an individual’s psychology or personal power (Simonton, 1994). They focus on a sociocultural context in examining greatness (Simonton, 2002). Others believe that greatness manifests itself in moments of historical confusion through a singular focus on moral issues (Addams, 2002). Thus there is a necessity to qualify what greatness means for psychology.

The definition that I proposed at the beginning of this paper is that greatness is the optimal use of the positive psychological resources and capabilities of an individual. Allow me briefly to clarify this definition. An important note prior to this definition is that I am proposing greatness be the aspiration and comprehensive goal of psychology. Providing a goal that institutions can study and individuals strive for means that it is beyond the average and norm, and requires effort to achieve. That is why I define greatness using the word optimal. Within this context optimal means the highest level possible given the realities of the individual’s circumstance. For example, judging the greatness of a four-year old will be comparatively different than that of an adult because of their capacities. However within this understanding the four-year old could be said to be achieving psychological greatness because he or she was using his or her psychological means to an optimal extent. Thus the definition bypasses the limits of age, IQ, etc. Use connotes some sort of outward manifestation. Researchers have identified that the adage “practice makes perfect” contains wisdom and in using one’s abilities, over time, an individual can develop toward greatness (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2007). There is also a theory that individuals will manifest their greatness by how they affect the society around them. Some researchers see this societal benefit as an essential characteristic (Jones, 1956). Though there conceivably might be individuals who optimize their psychological capacities and not manifest them, I believe they would be in the minority. Therefore the concept of optimal use implies that
the individual be connected in some social relationships and the use of their capacities would affect others. My use of positive psychological is specifically to focus on the use of positive, healthy psychological methods that encourage an individual to move toward wholeness. Greatness stems from the positive or healthy psychological dimensions of an individual. This is not to imply that individuals cannot overcome negative events, poor societal upbringing, psychological or physical limitations, and so forth, but that they access positive psychological means to move them onward to greatness. Resources means the psychological, sociological, physical, and environmental realities inherited and/or experienced by an individual which is the foundation upon which they develop as an individual. For example, though some individuals are blessed from birth with genetic gifts, which tend to manifest themselves more profoundly in athletic pursuits, others are not so blessed (Ericsson, 1996). The acknowledgment of resources recognizes the effect that genetics, personality, environment, etc. can play in the movement toward greatness. Finally capabilities means the developmental desire and determination of the individual. How far are they willing to go to grow and develop their skills and talents? How much self-reflection will they undertake to know their strengths and weaknesses? How much grit and determination do they have to aspire to their goals? Individuals can broaden and strengthen certain aspects of their behavior, thought processes, etc. These capabilities develop as the person becomes aware of them, strengthens them, practices them, and uses them to benefit the person’s life. It is in the interplay of the resources of an individual along with their capabilities, that greatness is formed.

One final clarification is necessary to complete the understanding of greatness. When asked to define heaven, Catherine of Siena, a 14th century mystic, said “all the way to heaven is heaven.” I find myself facing the same conclusion as I attempt to define greatness. It is both an
end and a path. All the way to greatness is greatness. The definition I provided transcends time constraints. Greatness, in my definition, can be the moment, the process, and the end-goal. As long as an individual is making optimal use of their positive psychological resources and capabilities in any given moment, they will experience greatness. Developing their resources and capabilities, thereby expanding their capacities and moving forward on a journey to optimal psychological capacity, is greatness. And, of course, when an individual has reached a point in their life when they optimally use, on a consistent basis, their positive psychological resources and capabilities, they experience greatness. So greatness is not simply an end-goal but an optimal state.

**Brief Historical Review**

Psychology has taken heroic and stalwart steps toward the understanding and alleviating of mental distress and disorder. Within this history is a journey toward grasping the full extent of human limitations and capacity. As psychology grew in understanding humankind, the assumed and stated goals and aspirations of psychology changed to reflect the most recent model and concepts. A brief review of psychology’s history, highlighting the various goals that demanded attention because of new and profound information, will elucidate the disparate goals and help clarify the need for a single, unifying goal.

Traditional psychology focused on studying, understanding, and treating mental illness. The early emergence of psychology in America was predicated on alleviating the mental and emotional challenges of individuals. This gave rise to phrenology, physiognomy, mesmerism, spiritualism and mental healing (Benjamin & Baker, 2004). Only subsequent to these responses did the scientific study and application of psychology begin in earnest in the United States. When
the first psychological clinic was established at the University of Pennsylvania by Lightner Witmer in 1896 a movement occurred in clinical psychology that tended toward a focus on dysfunction since Witmer dealt primarily with children who had learning or school problems (Maddux, 2002). Simultaneously, though psychologists’ academic training took place in universities, their initial practical training took place in hospitals, moving them into a diagnostic role.

After World War II, more of a focus was placed on pathology because of the economic feasibility for research grants. Initially the founding of the Veterans Administration fostered work on mental illness because of the challenge of treating the men and women returning from war. Secondly the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health created a greater focus on mental illness and provided grants primarily for the study of pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

This focus on pathology led psychology to adopt a medical model with a goal of alleviating pathology. Mental illness was viewed as a disease with the clinician playing the role of diagnostician. Pathologies were theorized as coming from within the person and therefore had to be “cured” by using the proper treatment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Maddux, 2002). This focus and goal helped identify many disorders and lead to identifying a cure or a way to alleviate them (Seligman, 1994). Even the language of the medical model was adopted by clinical psychology. The terms illness, patient, diagnosis, treatment, doctor, etc., all reflect the concept of a medical model designed to diagnose and treat illness.

Within the context of this medical model, identifying normal behavior became paramount since it was the benchmark on which psychology focused. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
of Mental Disorders (DSM) focuses on the assessment and treatment of psychological problems. Inherent in its very nature is the identification of what is normal and abnormal. Yet this requires a “clear criteria for distinguishing between normal and abnormal thinking, feeling, and behaving and between healthy and unhealthy psychological functioning” (Maddux, 2002, p.19). Though the DSM admits there is variance in the boundaries between healthy and unhealthy psychological functioning, the subsequent descriptions contradict that admission and attempt to distinguish between normal and abnormal. So, though psychology presents as a goal, helping individuals attain normal mental and emotional states, there is uncertainty, within some of the measurements of certain pathologies, on where the line occurs between normal and abnormal (Maddux, 2002). The discrepancy in the definition of normal behavior or thinking places normalcy in question as a unifying goal for psychology.

Additionally, focusing on normalcy as the goal for psychology negates the healthy end of the population. Mentally healthy individuals cannot participate because they are already “north of zero.” Normalcy, as a goal for study and clinical intervention, ignores prodigies, geniuses, and even just highly functioning individuals. There is an innate bias that leads the practitioner and researcher to focus only on pathology, therefore providing little encouragement to search for evidence of healthy functioning (Maddux, 2002). Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi (2000) state that “Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best” (p. 7). Focus on only studying and treating individuals to achieve normalcy is short sighted at best and at worst, flawed science by ignoring entire healthy segments of humanity.

The movement away from an exclusively medical model that only focuses on studying and assisting people to achieve normalcy opened up the possibility for new goals in psychology
that focused on generating, assisting and multiplying healthy functioning. Humanistic psychology pursued the study of healthy behavior and human possibility and opened up the dormant side of psychology (Maddux, 2002). Psychologists realized that people did not stop at merely focusing on what is necessary to survive, but there is within each person a tendency to want to actualize their potential (Rogers, 1959). Maslow (1968) proposed a hierarchy of needs and noted a natural development in humans toward self-actualization. Later in his career he moved beyond self-actualization and explored “peak-experiences” and transcendence (Maslow, 1964, 1969, 1971). Yet it was the advent of positive psychology, using traditional scientific methodology on the healthy aspects of human development, which fostered the need for a new goal that encompassed the study and application of the psychology of both function and dysfunction; of our human frailties and our possibility; of our weaknesses and our strengths.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi opened new fields of exploration by examining optimal experiences and identifying the characteristics necessary for those experiences. Calling these optimal experiences “flow” Csikszentmihalyi (1989) focused on individuals who, at a peak moment in their profession, or experience, lose themselves in the task they are undertaking and experience a timelessness and ease of movement that transcends much of normal daily life. This focus of study and application was so far beyond studying pathology that it seemed in another discipline. Yet all Csikszentmihalyi did was study what he believed is one of psychology’s core missions: to help make high human potential a reality (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000).

Csikszentmihalyi deepened his exploration by examining the processes and environment necessary for flow and in doing such, pushed psychology to embrace farther reaches of human possibility. He identified a “flow channel” as the optimal balance between challenge and skills. Within this channel, individuals can experience flow by actively maintaining the precarious
balance between the precise amount of challenge with the requisite amount of skill. He challenged the century-old notion that work has to be laborious and offered that work, consciously manipulated, can be an optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Though he did not intend to establish a comprehensive goal for psychological study and application, his work pushes the psychological community to ensure that the goal for psychology be inclusive enough to embrace optimal experience and flow.

One of the initial end-goals posited by positive psychology was happiness. Happiness was seen to be the culmination of a good life, a sense of well-being, supportive relationships and possibly some achievement. The goal of psychology was to study and apply research to help people reach a desired level of happiness. This happiness level can be identified through subjective means allowing individuals to gauge how they are feeling and these subjective measures were found to be convergent when compared with other measures (Myers & Deiner, 1995). With happiness as the goal of psychology, studies focused on how to increase the level of individual and group happiness with global research even comparing the happiness level of various nations (Veenhoven, 2004).

Happiness as a goal engendered much dialogue because of the conceptual differences of what it really meant to be happy and whether or not happiness was a viable goal for psychology. The disparity of the common understanding of happiness challenged the clarity of the study. Two very diverse definitions of happiness, one of *hedonia* (positive affect and pleasure) and the other of *eudaimonia* (living a full life) pulled researchers in different directions (Deci & Ryan, 2006). The lack of clarity was compounded by conflicting references to Aristotelian philosophy. Proponents of happiness substantiated their claim by relying on Aristotle and his elevation of happiness which, they believed Aristotle proposed, “represents our highest calling, our ultimate
purpose, the final end to which all others are necessarily subordinate (McMahon, 2004, p.6)”. This Aristotelian focus further exacerbated the discussion because of misunderstanding surrounding what Aristotle really meant by the highest good.

Aristotle builds his argument for the highest good by stating that all things have their function. He proposes that the function of humans is to do what humans do; that is to rationally pursue the virtues through the exercise of an excellent life. Aristotle states “if all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind” (Aristotle, 1955, p.16). The challenge occurred with the translation of the word *eudaimonia* from the original Greek. Searching for a comparable word, translators settled on the word *happiness*. By translating eudaimonia as happiness a strong connection was made with the hedonic concept of happiness which is not what Aristotle meant (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Later studies redefined eudaimonia as living a complete life and therefore focused more on the content of life and the processes involved with living well, pursuing one’s potential and striving for excellence, thereby moving away from a simple definition of happiness (Ryan, Deci, & Huta, 2006; Deci, & Ryan, 2006; Ryff, & Singer, 2008). Yet happiness, with connections to both the hedonic and eudaimonic meaning, was elevated as a goal for psychology and humanity with all sides claiming their origin from Aristotle, creating a confusing, nebulous end-goal.

Yet, the study of and focus on happiness as the end goal of psychology continued to gain ground in western cultures. With the development of new technology, medicine, and a consistent growth in prosperity, western countries had the luxury to pursue happiness and foster the study of it (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). However, since this prosperity was not global, some countries focused less on happiness and more on basic survival. Even the word or concept of
happiness, according to some researchers, did not translate across cultures (Wierzbicka, 2004). So happiness as an end-goal for psychology, did not have the historical/philosophical basis from Aristotle, was too scattered because of multiple understandings of the concept and was not universally understood.

As the debate regarding happiness as the goal of psychology continued, another goal was offered as the upper range of a continuum of mental health. Flourishing, at the high end of mental health, was contrasted with the absence of mental health characterized as languishing (Keyes, 2002). Flourishing was identified as the top end of the mental health continuum and therefore became the goal of both study and application to assist individuals to enjoy the benefits of flourishing. Though the simple definition of flourishing is the absence of mental illness, Keyes deplored such a limited and negative definition. Broader than just “mental health”, Keyes insisted that flourishing contained all of the aspects of subjective well-being with a strong emphasis on social relationships. “To be flourishing is to be filled with positive emotion and functioning well psychologically and socially” (Keyes, 2002, p. 210). Fredrickson (2005) expanded the definition of flourishing to mean “to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (p. 678). This expansion of the definition of flourishing broadened the concept and provided a greater awareness and inclusion of individuals who function at high levels of psychological health.

Flourishing is the most positively focused and comprehensive of all the goals of psychology thus far. Development is part and parcel of the understanding of flourishing. There is not an exact moment when flourishing is achieved. Flourishing occurs along the way. However the limitations of the concept prove reason to hesitate establishing it as the goal for psychology. Though Fredrickson expands the definition of flourishing, Keyes continues defining flourishing
mostly through a negation of pathology. Rather than embracing those individuals who have highly developed psychological capacities, flourishing is mostly assessed by the absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2007). Thus, though flourishing turns the goal of psychology toward mental health, there is a continuing focus on registering the lack of mental illness rather than a psychological state or goal one can aspire to.

The final suggested goal of psychology, subjective well-being, currently seems to be the most in favor. The shift of focus to mental health from mental illness has essentially spotlighted the over 50 years of research on subjective well-being (Keyes, 2007). Subjective well-being is a broad category including people’s emotional responses, judgment of life satisfaction and domain satisfaction, which is viewed more as a general area than a specific concept. Additionally the core determinant of this category, by definition, is the affective and cognitive evaluation of one’s life (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Yet this evaluation extends from momentary evaluations to global determination regarding the value, or happiness of one’s life (Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005).

Though positive psychologists speak of subjective well-being as their focus, most isolate and study whether or not people are happy. At least three groups of theories evolved around subjective well-being and each theory group proposes various ways an individual can achieve subjective well-being. The first type, need and goal satisfaction theory, focuses on the elimination of pain and the satisfaction of needs. Secondly, the process or activity theories, state that happiness is the goal toward which activity focuses. As people focus their energy on activities which make them happier, they will obtain happiness. Finally the third set of theories focuses on genetics and predisposition as the predominant cause of happiness. This group converges around research about the substantial genetic component to happiness and highlights
the influence of adaptation and personality characteristics (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). These three broad groups contain theories about subjective well-being and place it as a focus of psychology.

Though the concept of subjective well-being is broadly used, the multiple elements assessed in this concept use multiple measures and the measures need to be correlated (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Some researchers argue that the correlation between the different measures is far from perfect (Kim-Prieto et al., 2005). Additionally the results of the measures are based on an individual’s self-assessment. These results can vary dramatically depending on when the measures are applied; whether moment to moment, or on a global scale (Diener et al., 1999). Finally, subjective well-being essentially identifies how the individual feels at that moment and is not necessarily a measure of the psychological maturity of an individual, or their psychological health. Some researchers suggest that individuals can be happy and have high levels of subjective well-being, while being extremely narcissistic and making the people around them miserable (Rose & Campbell, 2004). So, subjective well-being is not necessarily the pinnacle for positive psychology.

**Historical Precedent for Greatness**

The question remains, are there historical precedents that envisaged greatness as the goal and aspiration of psychology? Have other researchers, practitioners and commentators of psychology identified or suggested an optimal state toward which individuals can be lead and in which state individuals would be at their psychological best? Of course, as with most good research, the answer is yes and no. There is strong historical precedent toward an optimal state in which humans function with full psychological health and vigor. I will briefly review some of
the contributors to that thought. However, I have not found any previous identification of the optimal psychological state as greatness. Various names and concepts are offered. Having reviewed the historical momentum to this period, perhaps now is the time to adopt a new nomenclature.

The origin of the historical precedent for greatness as the goal of humanity and therefore psychology was buried centuries ago under a difference in translation of one word, *eudaimonia*. As stated before, the standard translation of eudaimonia is happiness which currently is linked mostly with hedonic pleasure. I would like to briefly revisit Aristotle’s understanding of eudaimonia to draw out how the word infers greatness as the end goal.

Rereading Aristotle, the description of eudaimonia is focused less on a particular endpoint and more about how a person is to live. Aristotle identifies eudaimonia as “the good.” When writing the definition of eudaimonia, Aristotle wrote, “the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind” (Aristotle, 1955, p. 16). Aristotle continues in *The Nicomachean Ethics* to emphasize that eudaimonia is living in the most excellent manner and performing virtuous activities with excellence. It is not enough, in the view of Aristotle, to live a virtuous life. Eudaimonia is living a virtuous life to a degree of excellence. Nor is eudaimonia achieved at one specific point according to Aristotle. It is a complete lifetime (Aristotle, 1955). So a precedent for living an excellent life, or greatness, was lost because of the mistranslation of one word.

The possibility of an end-goal of greatness, in some form, reemerged with Maslow (1968) who was almost giddy in his introduction in *Toward a Psychology of Being* because new
ideas of human sickness and health informed a psychology that he found “so thrilling and so full of wonderful possibilities” (p. 3). He continued, based on his hierarchy of needs, to explore creativity, values, motivation, and identified ways that individuals achieve self-actualization. Since, according to Maslow, self-actualization was the peak of human psychological development, he broadened his own definition of self-actualization based on other current definitions. He noted that “All definitions accept or imply, (a) acceptance and expression of the inner core or self, i.e., actualization of these latent capacities, potentialities, ‘full functioning,’ availability of the human and personal essence. (b) They all imply minimal presence of ill health, neurosis, psychosis, of loss or diminution of the basic human and personal capacities” (Maslow, 1968, p. 197). Though Maslow embraces the bifurcated nature of identifying a psychologically healthy individual, the absence of mental illness along with the fullest functioning possible, he focuses mostly on helping individuals achieve their potential.

Maslow suggests that psychology aim at helping individuals achieve self-actualization, but does not stop there. Counselors are to foster the self-actualization of people rather than focus on curing disease (Maslow, 1971). This movement toward self-actualization is not something that occurs at a specific time, but it a life long journey toward the individual’s highest self. However, Maslow, in his own research and intellectual development went beyond identifying self-actualization as the end-goal. Consistent with his exploration of self-actualized individuals, he identified a state beyond self-actualization, fostered by metamotivations and offered this as the highpoint of human development. He called it transcendence. To Maslow (1971) “Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature and to the cosmos” (p. 269). Identifying a
state wherein the highest human potential is reached was a very strong precedent toward
greatness as the goal of psychology.

Positive psychology, from its foundation, proposed to refocus psychology back to its dual
missions of strengthening people and actualizing human potential. This refocusing was necessary
in light of psychology’s study of and fixation on the disease model (Seligman &
Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology, by its stated mission, encourages study into the
farthest reaches of human capability. As Peterson (2006) notes, “the most basic assumption that
positive psychology urges is that human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease,
disorder, and distress” (p. 5). Within this mission psychology needs a goal that includes
individuals who are at the top tail of the normal psychological health curve and those who are
striving to get there. Psychologists hoping to improve humanity cannot just focus on those who
suffer. Psychologically healthy individuals need advice and examples to help them live fuller
lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). So, positive psychology also has urged the need for
study and application in the fullness of human potential, thus establishing a precedent for
identifying greatness as the goal of psychology.

Research Developments

Since there is historical precedent for greatness as the goal of psychology, can research
establish and validate the pathways to greatness and the benchmarks along the journey? Some of
this work has begun, though none specifically identifying greatness as the end-goal, but
essentially they study either the momentary experience of greatness, or the gradual acquisition of
the psychological characteristics that lead to greatness. I will briefly identify some of the
research developments that lend credence to an authentic and valid study of greatness in three
different arenas: the identification of an ultimate goal, the theorizing of how to attain the goal, and the momentary experience of goal while still on the journey.

In examining the research about goal identification, Maslow, as one of the earliest to identify a goal for psychological development, admits that the identification of self-actualization as a goal for individuals initially came about through his reflection on a limited group of people he admired and sought to understand. He states that it was not for research purposes that he reflected on this group, but out of admiration and devotion. Other studies are cited subsequent to his initial proposal of self-actualization, i.e., Carl Rogers and J.F. Bugental, but even Maslow admits that they add up to corroborative support, rather than replicated support for his work (Maslow, 1971). Still the body of research on self-actualizing people, transcendence, and peak experiences continues to grow. Around the same time that Maslow was focusing on studying self-actualizing people, Erik Erikson proposed a theory of psychosocial stages of development leading eventually to ego integrity. Erikson theorized that individuals had to pass through specific milestones to reach the next stage. Ego integrity, as the final stage, is the contentment an individual feels having resolved all of the issues in the previous stages (Erikson, 1982). Erikson’s research revolved around identifying the stages and the movement through and on to the next one. Keyes (2002) provides another example of research focused on establishing an end-point, a state that individuals can and do achieve. He initially identified flourishing as the end point on the continuum of mental health and continued to provide research that flourishing, as the endpoint of mental health, needs to be the focus for comprehensive mental health (Keyes, 2007). Each of these men provided research to show there is a state that is more mentally healthy than others and that this state is reached through some growth as though reaching a pinnacle.
As some researchers proffer the concept of a specific end goal, research is also necessary on how to attain that end goal. Many researchers offer theory on psychological development. Some, however, focus on a specific endpoint and so propose developmental theories about attainment of an end goal. I review a select few of these developmental theories as precursors to developmental theory toward greatness.

Most of the current theory surrounds the concept of moving toward well-being, but currently well-being is being viewed in terms of living life in a full and satisfying way rather than just happiness. Happiness is viewed as an integral part, but not the goal (Deci & Ryan, 2006). The key to this theorizing is that moving toward a higher or more psychologically mature state is instinctive. Deci and Ryan (2000) hypothesize “we suggest that it is inherent in people’s nature to action in the direction of increased psychological differentiation and integration in terms of their capacities, their valuing processes, and their social connectedness” (p. 230). This movement toward integration is theorized to occur in a number of ways. Ryff offers six characteristics of psychological well-being and suggests that development toward and fulfillment of these characteristics results in higher levels of well-being (Ryff, 1989). Waterman suggests that finding fulfillment in various activities identifies whether or not one has achieved well-being (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2006). The different focus of these two theories does not negate the concept that there is a specific developmental process toward a psychological goal. Ryan, Deci, and Huta offer their own theory of movement toward an integrated life. Their theory of self-determination, based on four motivational concepts, focuses on a lifestyle, not on specific outcomes. However they do believe that living this eudaimonic lifestyle will lead to some positive outcomes (Ryan, Deci & Huta, 2006). The key, however, is their theory, and that of others, is based on the idea that with development, individuals can enhance their psychological
capacity and enjoy the fullness of life. There is also the possibility that a critical incident is necessary to be the catalyst for rapid development of capacities that lead to greatness (Srikantia, 2001). These theories give credence to the development toward greatness. Why is this so important? Peterson (2006) put it best, “It is an article of faith among many psychologists – and certainly among most positive psychologists- that the human condition can be improved by the intelligent application of what we have learned” (p. 310).

Finally, research also has identified moments when everything seems to come together, when conditions are such that individuals experience a sense of completeness, wholeness and moving beyond themselves. The research on these moments lends credence to the concept that greatness is attainable and within our reach. Maslow examined peak experiences and though he compared them to religious moments, he nevertheless identified characteristics wherein individuals experience a type of epiphany. These characteristics resemble the description of a person who is psychologically balanced and connected. Maslow notes that in these peak moments, individuals see the universe as a whole as befits the tremendous concentration that occurs and so they become ego-transcending. There is a loss of fear and anxiety and a gain of humility and love. The individual moves closer to a perfect identity (Maslow, 1964). This is the ideal description of and individual experiencing a moment of greatness. Everything seems to come together and they are able to transcend their normal thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Still, the research on these peak moments did not cease with Maslow. Csikszentmihalyi has researched the experience of losing oneself in the activity or in the moment. Flow is the total absorption in an activity that occurred among athletes, musicians, artists, etc, which attracted Csikszentmihalyi to study this phenomenon. Similar to Maslow’s peak experience, flow offers specific characteristics that display people at their best. However, moving beyond Maslow,
Csikszentmihalyi researched not only the characteristics of flow, but the conditions under which flow is most likely to occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi’s research unveiled the dynamic systemic aspect of the flow moment, so that these experiences are not seen as an transitory optimal experience meant to be passively experienced by the recipient, but rather an experience that can be stimulated by environmental and psychological preparedness. The flow research allows for the use of positive interventions and programs to foster flow (Nakamura, J. & Csikszentmihalyi, M., 2005). Still the study of flow does not stop at various unrelated peak moments. The more peak moments one experiences, the more one is likely to experience another. Though there are specific personality types for whom flow is more likely to occur, conditions can foster it in others. Gradually these moments become a way of life. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) offer that, through the lens of flow research “a good life is one that is characterized by complete absorption in what one does” (p. 89). So, even these individual moments, taken together, can offer an opportunity to move toward greatness.

These selected areas, by no means comprehensive, offer the possibility that good scientific study can identify higher states wherein psychological capacities are expanded and used. Whether this research focuses on defining a specific goal, identifying the path, or highlighting moments in which the optimal is experienced, the studies indicate that there are higher capacities which we have not fully realized yet. These experiences require more research specifically to identify the upper realms of possibility for the psychologically optimized person, what that might mean as a momentary experience and what that might mean as a lifestyle. This requires a conscious clarification of the goal of this study and movement.

**Greatness as the Goal of Psychology**
In any field, study and application must have a focus if they are to be methodically regulated and meticulously maintained. Psychology needs a focus that encompasses the fullness of both its study and application and reflects the complexities of a changing world (Bandura, 2001). Moreover psychology deserves a focus that manifests what it desires most for people. Moving people away from illness is laudable, but is that what psychology hopes to provide, as its greatest benefit to mankind? If that answer is affirmative, then psychology has already created a substantial legacy. However, if psychology also chooses to explore the possibilities of humanity, to plumb the depths of creativity, genius, passion, motivation, etc, then a more substantial goal must be assumed to encompass the hopes for what heights humanity is capable of achieving. Individuals and institutions move in the direction of that which they most profoundly inquire (Cooperrider, 2008). Directing psychology to explore the fullest dimensions of human capacity, that is human greatness, rather than a singular focus on pathology, or a bifurcated focus on illness or well-being, profoundly expands both its study and application.

Previous foci and goals do not encompass the full possibilities of humanity. The focus on illness and pathology was necessary in light of both the human devastation from war and the funding available for research. However, the psychology healthy segment of the population was ignored in this focus, since the focus of this study and application was to understand and alleviate pathology to move individuals back to an agreed upon norm. With the input of the humanist psychologists and Positive psychology, much work has been done to augment the understandable pathological focus. This expanded awareness explored new areas of healthy psychology possibilities, but so far without a specific goal in mind. The various goals offered by Positive psychology, as explored earlier, broadened the focus of psychology but not sufficiently
enough to encompass the highest potential of individuals, nor to encourage them to greater possibilities than they might set for themselves.

Even within specific areas of research, positive psychology’s theory and research elicit the need for a clear, compelling goal. Positive emotions, as an example, move individuals toward greater capacity. Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory reflects the cumulative effects of positive emotions and the greater capabilities they engender. Fredrickson posits that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action, while simultaneously building physical, intellectual, and emotional resources (Fredrickson 1998). Fredrickson’s research does not address the issue of where positive emotions lead us (that was not her purpose). The question of where we are headed by “broadening and building” remains open. What is the goal?

Hence identifying greatness as the aspiration and goal of psychology provides the broadest focus possible to encompass all of psychological study and application. Initially the study of greatness, as a psychological reality, will add depth and breadth to research. Rather than focusing on studying on how individuals achieving normalcy, happiness, or subjective well-being, all of these dimensions are encompassed within greatness. Psychological study would explore how to release potential and release blockages to the fullest development of individual capacities. Concomitant with study, application would provide ample data on how cognitive and behavioral interventions allowed, encouraged and enabled individuals to pursue higher goals and possibilities for themselves. As psychologists seek to help individuals who struggle psychologically, they have a goal that is north of normal. Rather than adhere to an imposed limitation of normalcy, individuals could look toward the possibility that after psychological intervention they might aspire to achieve some other possibilities or goals for themselves. For individuals who already are psychologically healthy, positing greatness as the goal for
psychology opens up broader possibilities for study, intervention, and application. Psychologists could assist individuals to move beyond awareness and acceptance of their psychological health, to an active development and use of their fullest psychological capabilities. Positive psychology has begun this movement, but there are much grander possibilities.

Finally, offering greatness, as defined earlier, as the goal of psychology connects to the human desire for meaning. Remember greatness, as I defined it, is the optimal use of the psychological resources and capabilities of an individual. Using one’s psychological resources and capabilities implies interacting with and affecting the world. Humans desire to interact with their world, to leave a legacy. They desire to be more than passive reactors to the incidents of the world around them, tossed and blown by the winds of fortune. They have the capability to reveal the greatest of human strengths in the midst of inhuman circumstances (Frankl, 1963). They desire to find and apply some overall concept of meaningfulness and that means interacting with the world and not just being a passive recipient of whatever come toward oneself (Baumeister, 2005). This search for meaning reflects people’s intrinsic developmental processes not defensive processes (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Thus meaning is also fulfilled by moving toward greatness.

Greatness as the aspiration and goal of psychology moves study and application to the fullest level possible. Psychology would study and posit application based on what would be the highest level of human achievement possible in various circumstances. Rather than intimidate, this should help all people be aware of their capabilities. Greatness refocuses individuals on something much larger than just themselves, or achieving average. It excites and encourages through the realization that greatness is possible for everyone.

Conclusion
Much of my desire for a clear, elevating goal for psychology was derived through my corporate experience. As a Vice President at Merrill Lynch and then as a consultant to Fortune 500 companies, I quickly learned that any organization, without a clear goal, was like a ship without a rudder, pushed by winds of trends, tossed by waves of change, or most often pulled by rip-tides that follow money. Organizations and institutions at their best identify a clear, elevating goal that is their north star to navigate by. Psychology is no different. Global interests, human advancement, and depletion of funds push, pull and toss our science. Without a specific goal we flounder, doing good work wherever we are, but not setting the course for where we hope to be.

Historical circumstances have dictated much of where psychology has focused and now, with the advent of positive psychology, new horizons have opened up. Yet rather than focus our science, this has simply added more areas of study. There needs to be clarification about the comprehensive goal of our study and application.

Greatness, as a concept, contains all of the possibilities of humanity. It is the pinnacle of what any of us can hope to be. If psychology wishes to assist people in using the fullest of their psychological potential, it naturally leads to greatness. This goal contains the entirety of what we hope psychology will bring to humanity.

Though there are many unanswered questions about this goal, it provides the opportunity to examine humanity through a new lens. If we unleash the capabilities of individuals, what will they achieve? If we focus, not just on having individuals achieve normalcy, but help them aspire to greatness, what can they become? If we, as a science, study what it takes to be at our very best, what new horizons will that open?
Greatness offers us new horizons and new challenges, but mostly, it offers us a common goal. It is a vision that simultaneously broadens and expands our horizons while including a wider variance of study and practice. Greatness needs to be the aspiration and goal of psychology.
References


